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ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension is much more than a decoding of the printed words on the page; it is, rather, a complex interaction between readers and their personal past experiences as they relate to the text. A connection between the text and past experiences of the readers can stimulate expectations about the text. Facilitating these links presupposes a careful review of appropriate children's literature. Two books particularly suited to calling up memories in the reader are "Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge" by Mem Fox and "When I Was Young in the Mountains" by Cynthia Rylant. Teachers can generate a list of words representing key concepts from such books. Students then make their own predictions about the story's plot. After reading the story, these predictions are compared with the author's intended message. Students choose one of their own memories to use as a focus for personal narratives. These writings are first shared in peer-response groups and then the teacher responds to the writings. An analytical scale is used for assessing the writing. Such a scale guides a purposeful dialogue between student and teacher and eases the student through the process of revision. (The analytical scale is attached.) (RS)

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Memories and Written Remembrances: Creating a Link Between Prior Knowledge and Children's Literature

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Classroom teachers committed to making their students proficient in reading and writing face a complex task. Whole language instruction demands a meaningful connection of reading and writing experiences, and this is not easy. It means attending to developmental teaching strategies (at all grade levels) that enhance the comprehension of literature selections enough to foster reading enjoyment, while establishing fluent writing skills. And it presupposes that the teachers have a broad enough theory base to effectively employ the reading/writing process in the classroom. This paper focuses on an instructional strategy and assessment procedure that implements writing as a technique to stimulate prior knowledge in reading, and then engages the student in a personal reading/writing activity.

The Reading Process

Reading comprehension is much more than a decoding of the printed words on the page; it is, rather, a complex interaction between the reader and his or her personal past experiences as they relate to the text. Rosenblatt (1978) calls

this "transaction," and defines the reader's goal in the reading process as having, "as full an aesthetic experience as possible, given his own capacities and the sensibilities, preoccupations and memories he brings to the transaction" (p. 132). Corcoran (1987) views the reading process as an "act of creation" in the sense that the reader combines personal experiences with information from the text, culminating in an "aesthetic" reading experience. He describes this "aesthetic" reading experience as involving,

> those aspects of remembrance, speculation, and association which are evoked in the process of creating a story or poem. This act of creation depends intimately on our store of past experiences and our previous encounters with spoken or written texts. We need constantly and confidently to reassure our students of the validity of their personal reconstructions, and of the importance of analogies and anecdotes embedded in their primary world (p. 43).

Even fluent readers need this contextual background if they are to optimize their reading experience. With little or no existing prior knowledge from which to draw meaning, the reading quickly becomes another dull classroom exercise. The teacher's job, then, is to initiate a predictive process that creates an anticipatory atmosphere in the classroom. Through a careful design of questions that match the literature selection, the teacher can engage students in a thought process that enhances the reading. Crafton (1982) urges that

> Students at all grade levels should be encouraged to anticipate what they are going to meet in the text before they start reading. Anticipation allows them to begin with what they know and to proceed from that point, with the reading experience acting as a real learning experience. Anticipation of content should have a positive effect on further concept development due to the use of prior knowledge to help propel the reader from one state of understanding to another (pp. 294-295).

Thus, a connection between the text and past experiences of the reader can stimulate expectations about the content of the text (Langer, 1981) and increase comprehension as "reading for the purpose of satisfying the reader's curiosity" occurs (Singer, 1978, p. 907). Pearson and Johnson (1978) describe the reading process as building bridges between what is new and what is known. This predictive strategy suggests an additional metaphor: that writing can function as an effective connecting link between the prior knowledge of the reader and comprehension of the text.

The Reading Selection

Facilitating these contextual links presupposes a careful review of appropriate literature. Reading selections should demonstrate themes, motifs, or archetypes universal enough so that they relate to the diverse student population of today's classroom. At the same time, they should contain story lines that are alive with a language that stimulates interest and fosters a love of reading.

Newman (1985) calls children's trade books "the cornerstone of a whole language curriculum" (p. 64), and children's literature published in the last decade or so serves especially well in these capacities as an impetus for reading and writing at any grade level. The topics of contemporary books are clearly defined, relevant, and they are crafted in a natural language that entices even the most reluctant reader. Two books particularly suited to calling up the memories of the reader are *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* by Mem Fox (1985) and *When I Was Young in the Mountains* by Cynthia Rylant (1982). Both selections deal with a pertinent aspect of memory and remembering, and Rylant's writing particularly models a superior narrative style. In addition, both books demonstrate the important characteristics of predictable materials as described by Newman (1985): they use repetitive language patterns, they have a good match between text and illustration, and they are about subjects with which the reader is familiar.

The predictive teaching strategy used in this investigation employs an initial list of words generated by the teacher which represents key concepts in *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge*. From these key terms the students make their own predictions about the story's plot, along with a personal definition of the term "memory." After reading the story, these predictions are compared with the author's intended message. In the story, Wilfrid prepares a memory basket of special artifacts for his elderly friend; likewise, the students are directed to list on paper special childhood remembrances that make up the contents of their "memory basket." Now that the thinking has begun, the teacher shares Rylant's book with the students, noting the similar family memories. The students now choose one memory of their own from their list and use it as a focus for a personal narrative. Moffett (1981) maintains that the best writing grows out of a beginning instruction in personal narrative, and this *prediction listing-composition* procedure almost guarantees student

writing samples that exhibit a wide variety of topics, a strong voice, and a solid theme. The following student writing possesses these characteristics:

> Every year my family would go to the beach in our camper. One year I decided to take a little rubber alligator. The day after I got to the beach, I played with the alligator outside for a while. Then I had to go inside to eat; now this is when the funny part begins. I forgot to take my alligator in that night and the next morning, I saw the funniest thing. An old woman, in her late 70's, white hair and wrinkled skin was beating my rubber alligator. Every time she would hit it, it would move. So she kept beating it....All of a sudden her husband came out of their trailer and said "Honey! What are you doing?" She stopped beating the alligator, turned around, dropped the stick and chased her husband around the trailer! By now, I was on the floor laughing as hard as I could. Then she ran out of breath and stopped running. They both started laughing and went inside their trailer.

Student writings, such as the previous composition, are first shared in peer response groups where both readers and writers employ the technique of "praise," "question," and "polish" as initial criteria for discussion. Dialogue notes in the form of reader-response are written by the teacher as another form of review.

The Writing Assessment

Evaluating student writing is a tricky business. Once having established a comfortable process approach to writing with student authors, it is a difficult and often contradictory task then to judge the writing with a final grade. Zemelman and Daniels (1988) distinguish between formative and summative evaluation, as they describe the many different roles teachers assume when working with students and their writing, and they address the realities of assessment as a necessary (and frustrating) part of writing instruction:

> Teachers often feel trapped by grades. Because grading is final and judgemental, we worry, justifiably, that grades will discourage students; but we also fear that

> without grades, the work won't really matter. Separating grades from response and evaluation is a first step in reducing this conflict. Grading then becomes only the last (and occasional) event in a dialogue between teacher and student (p. 231).

Kirby, Liner, and Vinz (1988) also attend to the problematic yet necessary task of writing assessment. They admit to there not being any "sure-fire, simple answers" (p. 216). Both authors offer several practical alternatives for writing assessment; the one employed here is an analytic scale that sets flexible criteria specifically designed for the qualities of memory writing, while allowing for improvement and growth of the writing assignment (Appendix). Encouraging student writers to take responsibility for the development of their own composing tasks is, to a large extent, dependent upon a purposeful dialogue between the teacher and student. An analytic scale or checklist not only guides this dialogue, but also eases the students through the revision process, focusing awareness on what true ownership in writing really

is. Kirby describes his editing checklist as "a tool and an opportunity to improve writing before the final grade" (p. 235). The editing checklist helps to improve the final papers by giving the students the added teacher perspective as well as the luxury of time that is always needed with any worthwhile piece of writing. Gregg, the author of the rubber alligator story, received high ratings for detail, introduction/summary, and inside/outside stuff. Other areas in which Gregg could improve included mechanics/usage and crafting. Specfic information contained on the checklist provides writers, such as Gregg, with encouragement for mastered techniques and valuable suggestions for effective writing.

By combining a shared reading experience with peer evaluation, teacher response, and student/teacher negotiation, this memory writing activity produces compositions that are quality pieces of writing rich with personal experiences.

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Appendix

Checkpoint for Memoir (Kirby, Liner, & Vinz, 1988, p. 227). Your piece was rated using the following criteria. You may work further on the piece in hopes of raising the score.

Detail

1 2 3 4 5 x 4 _____

Beginning and Ending

1 2 3 4 5 x 2 _____

Inside/Outside Stuff

1 2 3 4 5 x 4 _____

Mechanics and Usage

1 2 3 4 5 x 2 _____

Crafting

1 2 3 4 5 x 4 _____

Scheme & Overall Effectiveness

1 2 3 4 5 x 5 _____

Total Score _____

Comments: